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How is a secret society constructed?

Kate Hoolu

This is half tongue-in-cheek; a sociology checklist based on a magical order, rather than society at large. Please note, it is based on no real-life Occult Training Organisations in the magical field. Because they tend to sue...

So, how is a secret society constructed? From a variety of smaller units; various groups joined by some common bond or bonds such as a jointly held secret (or, as some would have it, a cosmic joke that you are let in on, but only by degrees). Whatever the nature of the smaller units they are all comprised of the base building block of society: INDIVIDUAL HUMAN BEINGS.

How does a secret society operate or function? The cynical answer is that it doesn't. Suspending belief a little allows me to say that a secret society functions as a result of co-operative (or at least not openly obstructive) inter-actions between different groups and/or individuals. Of course...

Why are some groups in a secret society more powerful than others? Using the metaphor of a wolf pack; there will always be alpha males who are strong enough, with the necessary will and intelligence to assume (or fight for) leadership. In the case of wolves it is the best for the pack that the leader is the strongest etc, as it is primarily his genes that go towards future generations to ensure the strongest pups and thus the continuation of the pack. Not necessarily so for humans; as power in a secret society is also reliant on capital, who has their hands on the magic books and tools, and the Orders and Charters to run the group (which are all usually hierarchically, rather than genetically inherited), the ability to manipulate the public face of the order, and to be in charge of deciding who gets initiated, and when- both of which abilities are learned. Alternative answers may be that for whatever reasons certain family of other closely knit groups have historical precedent for positions of leadership, such as having an individual who was initiated by 'X'; a previous great leader...these become pseudo-hereditary positions in the absence of revolutionary change.

What causes social change in a secret society? A desire from either the ruling element(s) of society or those ruled for a change to occur. If the rulers have true control, or the ruled have sufficient collective will then change will come about. Slow, peaceful change is evolutionary; sudden, violent change is revolutionary. Legal battles over copyright of rituals, libel, slander, magical battles and fistfights in the street are all possible.

Is a secret society normally in balance or in conflict? Look at history. Neither. The best metaphor here is from chemistry...with two chemicals in a state of equilibrium, the state is balanced, but in a dynamic fashion: all molecules are in states of change, but the rate of change is, on average, balanced out by opposite changes in molecules elsewhere. Of course, not all metaphors are equal, and magical group membership is rarely this cutesy.

What is the relationship of the individual to a secret society? The individual is not dependent on society for his existence. The secret society is entirely dependent upon the individual; as it has no existence of its own, only through people, and the supposed heritage it holds. A secret society is an amalgam of the qualities, actions and thoughts of individuals, both past and present members, and as such it can become rather dehumanising. Due to the collective nature; society seems "bigger" than the individual, i.e. more powerful. A summary of the relationship would be one of tacit suspicion, but occasional periods of general tolerance.

What is the primary purpose of sociological study of a secret society? To keep sociologists in jobs. Also to investigate and understand the many different aspects of behaviour of people; hopefully in a manner that allows the use of reliable information to make life something more than it is (subjective!). To understand what occultism is about for the participant. And to make a study in a way that avoids law enforcement agencies finding severed tongues on beaches and bodies hung by the neck from bridges, with pockets full of rocks, where the rising tide can cover their bodies. (Allegedly).

Macchiavelli had it right: (A Ruler)"ought to examine closely into all those injuries which it is necessary for him to inflict, and to do them all at one stroke so as not to have to repeat them daily; and thus by not unsettling men he will be able to reassure them, and win them to himself by benefits". Conversely John Stuart Mill couldn't have run a knitting circle, let alone a magickal group: "the individual is not accountable to society for his actions in so far as these concern the interests of no person but himself. Advice, instruction, persuasion, and avoidance by other people if thought necessary by them for their own good, are the only measures by which society can justifiably express its dislike or disapprobation of his conduct."

One example of how a group is formed would be the very early days of our modern Political system, where over time a group of individuals gathered together with a common purpose, chose a leader who then attended a centralised gathering of the leaders of other groups for a large region or entire nation. This system is just recognisable as that which we currently have in the UK, with local political party groups choosing a prospective MP, who, if elected goes to the Commons to represent their locality. The parliamentary system is thus based initially on the actions of individuals; and in turn it can then control the lives of those same people. Like a magical order... Analogies with Frankenstein's monster have been drawn; and it is a valid point that the creation has often become bigger than the creator(s). I don't know of a truly egalitarian Marxist magickal order anywhere- maybe someone out there can enlighten me? Stick it in the forum * link please.

One of Durkheim's main premises is that society remains cohesive due to the consensus will of the majority. That is, the members of a secret society hold and exhibit a set of values (traditional, religious, moral etc) that are agreed to be normal and acceptable behaviour; and that this allows the secret society to run smoothly. There are individuals or small groups who are exceptions to this rule of course; but in the main, the secret society continues from day to day much as it always has, with major change only occurring slowly over generations. With consensus comes the vision that as a secret society is so large, powerful and (perceptibly from day-to-day) unchanging it is then that secret society that shapes individuals. This is not a new perspective, over 2000 years before Durkheim, Aristotle had come to similar conclusions about the need for groups: "All communities are like parts of the political community..political associations, too, are believed to have been originally formed and to continue in being for the sake of advantage, for it is this that lawgivers have as their object, and people say that what is to the common advantage is just"

The main implications are that a secret society is a very static "thing" having some separation from individuals; hence there is little chance of anyone to make an impact on the society...at worst it is a science of inaction and reduced expectations. As with any societal theory, a great deal depends upon the operator who first puts it into effect; perhaps the Russian people were just unlucky in having Stalin to try out Marxism in the same way that the Golden Dawn had both Mathers and Yeats in competition, when along came Crowley. In a way there are corollaries with the maiden voyage of the Titanic; a seemingly unsinkable ship and a couple of seemingly wonderful means of liberation for the majority of mankind. Similar results in all cases.

Come to think of it, that wasn't so damn tongue in cheek...

KH

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